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Malestream Geography: Gender Patterns among UK Geography Faculty

This commentary reports the data available on the relative numbers of academics by gender and grade in the UK. It grows out of an accumulation of factors and events. First, conversations with colleagues, second papers on the social composition and gendered structures of geography as a discipline, and, third, a flier circulated with US figures at the 2002 AAG meeting, and finally and crucially, a lecture last year in a course on geography and gender. In that session I was doing a simple illustration of gendered occupational structures and their relevance to even the august institution that employs me and thus even to the fairly privileged lives of my students. I pointed out that in our department there were some ten full professors, of whom one was a woman, that there was (at the time) one other promoted woman and six women lecturers out of forty-three or so faculty, and this I contrasted with the departmental secretarial staff, entirely female, and the technical staff, ninety percent male, a graduate school around one third women and their undergraduate cohort which was fifty-two percent women. I am sure many of us have done a similar little spiel. One brave and curious soul asked how these percentages compared with national UK figures. I was stumped, and curious myself as to the answer. So I set off to track down the figures which form the main body of this commentary. I want to begin then by setting out a few of the issues and contexts around the data, then briefly describe the figures for the UK and draw out a few striking elements. I do not purport in this brief piece to offer much by way of explanation, but hope the numbers themselves may be salutary.

Gender in Geography Departments

There is a long history of exclusion of women from the institutions of geography (see for instance Bell and McEwan, 1996). Recent studies paint a mixed picture of gains for women in geography over the last twenty years, but one where the higher in the discipline you look the less progress seems to have occurred. It seems analogous to the situation described in the Greenfield report (2002) on women in science which argued there was less a glass ceiling and more a 'leaky pipe', with obstacles appearing for women at several career transitions. Winkler (2000) highlights the drop off for women's representation in US geography through the system of gaining tenure. She points to women holding only 16.2% of tenure stream positions in 1997-8 (up from 7.8% in 1988-9; page 738). To follow this issue of promotion and career path, we can look across a range of levels of seniority and influence in the discipline. Among undergraduate geography students, throughout the 80s in Britain the gender balance held steady at around 45-50% female (Chapman 1995, page 64). However there was a significant disparity in final degree results. From 1973 to 1992 there was a significant general improvement in results with the modal class shifting from lower to upper second (the proportion of 2:1s rising from somewhere over 35% in 1973 to around 50% by 1993). The gender break down though shows 55% of women in 1992 getting an upper second to 45% of men, while the percentages of women gaining firsts was consistently one to two percentage points below men but also a two to three point gap in third classes where men outnumber women. The implication has been drawn in studies in history that female students may be more risk averse in terms of producing answers that show 'flair' that tend to gain the highest grades – with male students more likely to make riskier arguments. This is not to say students risk thirds in order to get firsts, but rather that male students may be more self-confident,

sometimes foolishly so, more willing to argue their own case – which attracts the attention of the examiner to their gain or detriment (Hunt 2003). This raises questions at what is valued in terms of top grades and what forms of assessment reward what characteristics that are beyond the scope of this commentary.

McKendrick (1996, page 321) suggests that through the eighties up to 1994 the percentage of women postgraduate students in geography rose from 18% to 38%. There is though a notable divide emerging from the mid eighties where the percentage of female physical geography graduate students actually falls from 32% to 31% while the proportion in human geography rises from 33% to 43.6% (McKendrick 1996, page 324). To offer an updated snapshot, the gender breakdown of applications for funding for Economic and Social Research Council human geography research studentships in 2002 was 68 male and 73 female applicants resulting 25 and 24 awards respectively. For the USA, Brinegar's 1998 survey data suggests women comprised some 35% of doctoral, 37% of masters and 40% of Bachelors students (up from 18%, 28% and 31% respectively in the early 80s; Brinegar 2001, page 313, 315). Moving up a rung the numbers are fairly volatile for research grade staff – predominantly funded from sources such as grants. Over the six years there is no clear trend but between 27 % and 37% of those researchers funded from core recurring institutional funds were women, and between 35% and 41% of those funded by other sources. As we will see these figures are higher than for established faculty, and we might note the higher proportion of women on the potentially more insecure funding source.

INSERT TABLE 1 ROUND HERE

As we move into faculty levels though the percentages start to slide against women, so that according to official figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (table 18a, Resources in Higher Education Institutes, annual reports 1996-2001) women comprised only 17.9% of total core funded permanent academics in 1994-95, a figure which has risen to only 20.9% by 2000-01 (table 1). The figures record academics in posts funded by core recurring grants rather than, say, research contracts or in consultancy units. As a comparison in the USA women on average comprised 16.2% of faculty across all types of departments but actually did better in more prestigious departments, forming some 17.2% in PhD awarding departments in 1997-8 (Winkler 2000, page 743). Winkler's data are complemented by survey figures suggesting that women comprised 11% of tenured faculty in 1998 but 28% of non-tenured (Brinegar 2001, page 313). These figures are suggestive of a 'leaky pipe' analysis where we might expect a falling off each level of progression, and sure enough if we compare UK data for lecturer grade, then senior lecturer (principal lecturer in 'New Universities') and readers, and then professors (figure 1) we find in 1994-5 just 6.5% of professors were women, and women formed only 10.5% of other senior grades, and 23.6% of lecturers. In 2000-01 this had changed so that 8.6% of professors, and 20% of senior grades but 26.2% of lecturers were women. The progress of percentages is a little jumpy reflecting that say for chairs, we are actually talking about moving from only 8 female professors to the giddy heights of 20. In the whole country.

FIGURE 1 AROUND HERE:

One important element of this might be a cohort effect. Thus women becoming chairs now probably reflect the gender patterns of postgraduates twenty years previously. Thus there are two and half times the number the women professors there were just six years ago. However, against this it needs to be said that in a changing career structure there are also nearly twice as many male professors as there were six years ago. The relative rate of improvement is thus less spectacular. And the division in career terms remains very stark if we put it another way, that in 1994-5 14% of all established male geography academics were professors, as opposed to 4.4% of women. By 2000-01 that had changed to 23.2% and 8.2% respectively. The shifting proportions of each gender at each grade are illustrated in figure 2. Of course in comparing percentages this figure rather downplays the absolute difference in numbers between say the 215 male professors, 260 male senior staff and 450 lectures and the 20, 65 and 160 women at those respective grades in 2000-01. I am conscious that proportional figures do not convey the discrepancies of absolute numbers effectively, so figure 3 presents the same data in actual numbers. At the lower ends of the scale in 1994-5 79.4% of women were on the lecturer scale which had fallen to 65.3% by 2000-01, while for men the percentages fell from 56.1% to 48.6%. Comparatively in the US 47.7% of women are at the rank of assistant professor compared to only 23.3% of male faculty and only 8% of women were full professors (Winkler 2000, page 743-4).

INSERT FIGURE 2 ROUND HERE

Concluding discussion

The question that this begs is whether this change is good going or laggardly. One of the perpetuating effects noted by Winkler (2000, page 743) has been that most women have been isolated – for instance, the modal number of women in Bachelors degree awarding departments in the US in 1997-8 was 0, in MA awarding ones it was 1 and in PhD awarding ones it was 2. Or as an anonymous flier at the Los Angeles AAG meeting in 2002 put it, not only are only 9% of all Full Professors women but 15 of the 36 PhD granting programmes in the US have no women full professors, and in Canada the figure is 11 out of 21 (Anon 2002). In terms of appointment and promotion votes, and the more informal networks of influence, this does not favour women's advancement (Hanson 2000). It is also clear that women's biographies and constraints around double career households in a profession that often can involve long distance moves to gain promotion play an important role in the career profiles of women (Monk 2001).

The data here cannot really speak to the processes at work and all we can do is make some tentative observations as to the rate of change. The proportion of women overall has risen by 3 points, which is 17% increase over six years, and represents a 36% rise in the number of women with established posts, or if we put that in absolute numbers it is an increase of 65 women among academics. While the percentages sound impressive they do not represent much more than 'natural' cohort effects since in the same period, there has been a 16% increase overall in the number of faculty, and given that slightly over 15% of faculty were over 55 in 1994-5, and thus many will have retired (and again given cohort effects they would have been overwhelmingly men) there should be something around 30% new faculty in the system, and women's representation almost had to rise. Staying with the absolute numbers, we could note

that they indicate an increase of one hundred men in established positions in geography departments. If we allow for retirements of 10% (six years being two thirds of the 15% over 55) that would indicate 190 or so men entered the profession. A similar calculation suggests that only 80 or so women did likewise. So it would seem there is still a persistent recruitment imbalance.

Perhaps the most interesting area is in the changing senior grades, where the number of men in that grade expanded by 5% (though 2001 is not the peak year for numbers of men at that grade), while the number of women increased by 124% - though once again we must remember that is only 36 actual women being promoted. At the most senior levels of professors while the rate of growth for women is faster than overall growth, it still means that given retirements¹ means 10 men were appointed for every woman deemed worthy of a chair during this period. This is from a pool where, in 1994-5, there were eight times as many men who were senior lecturers and readers, a proportion has now dropped to 'only' four times as many. Put another way it means that in 2000-01 18% of all British geography academics were male professors (11.5% in 1994-95), while 1.7% were women professors (0.8% in 1994-95). At the other senior levels figure 1 shows the proportion who are women rising to reflect the (small) proportion of academics who are women. If we assume an average age distribution, and allowing for promotions to chairs (and assuming international transfers cancel out) there have been around 150 men promoted to senior grades, which is to say one in three of the male lecturers in 1994. Similar assumptions suggest that 51 women had to be promoted to senior grades – again around one in three of female lecturers in 1994. This grade then perhaps suggests the area of most rapid

change, and it may be that we will then see a rapid surge in women chairs as these senior grades establish themselves.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ROUND HERE

However, it is perhaps first salutary to note that the situation is still so dire at the start of the twenty-first century. Looking at the upward trends of figure 1 should not obscure the fact that the overall percentage of women is still only just breaking the twenty percent barrier and this is not a terrific achievement. Second, that the studies of women in science suggest it is the senior grades and promoted levels where issues such as taking career breaks or working part-time count most. How part-time work affects career progression is itself a tangled issue. We might also note that women are underrepresented in winning research grants and the key factors identified were that women who had taken career breaks and/or had domestic responsibilities were less likely to apply, and that women tended to occupy junior grades which were less likely to be successful (Blake & la Valle 2001). Add to this the fact that an industrial tribunal has pointed out that the RAE's assumption of output in a given time period is pretty unforgiving of time out and thus borders on being discriminatory. And the figures I am reporting elide two senior grades – Readers which are a 'research led' appointment and senior lecturer where promotion criteria include many of the institutional support and caring activities that are so often given to women faculty. How this might feed through to later promotion to Chairs, with almost wholly research criteria, is another large issue. Third, in many household location moves women's career prospects still tend to be sacrificed to a higher earning male partners – something doubly likely given academics' sliding pay rates and women's likelihood

of being in more junior positions. Both these latter factors would seem to suggest that more senior levels are likely to see slower progress than they otherwise might. At the moment the numbers suggest slow change, but change nonetheless.

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Table 1

UK Geography Academics, funded by core HEFCE grant, by grade and gender										
		Number % of of Profs Profs		Number % of of SL/R SL/R		Number % of of Lecturer Lecturer		Total % of Number total		Total number
2000-01	Men	215	91.5	260	80	450	73.8	925	79.1	1170
	Women	20	8.5	65	20	160	26.2	245	20.9	
1994-95	Men	116	93.5	247	89.5	464	76.4	827	82.1	1007
	Women	8	6.5	29	10.5	143	23.6	180	17.9	
Data from table 18a, Resources in Higher Education Institutes, Higher Education Statistics Agency, annual reports 1996-200										

Figure 1:

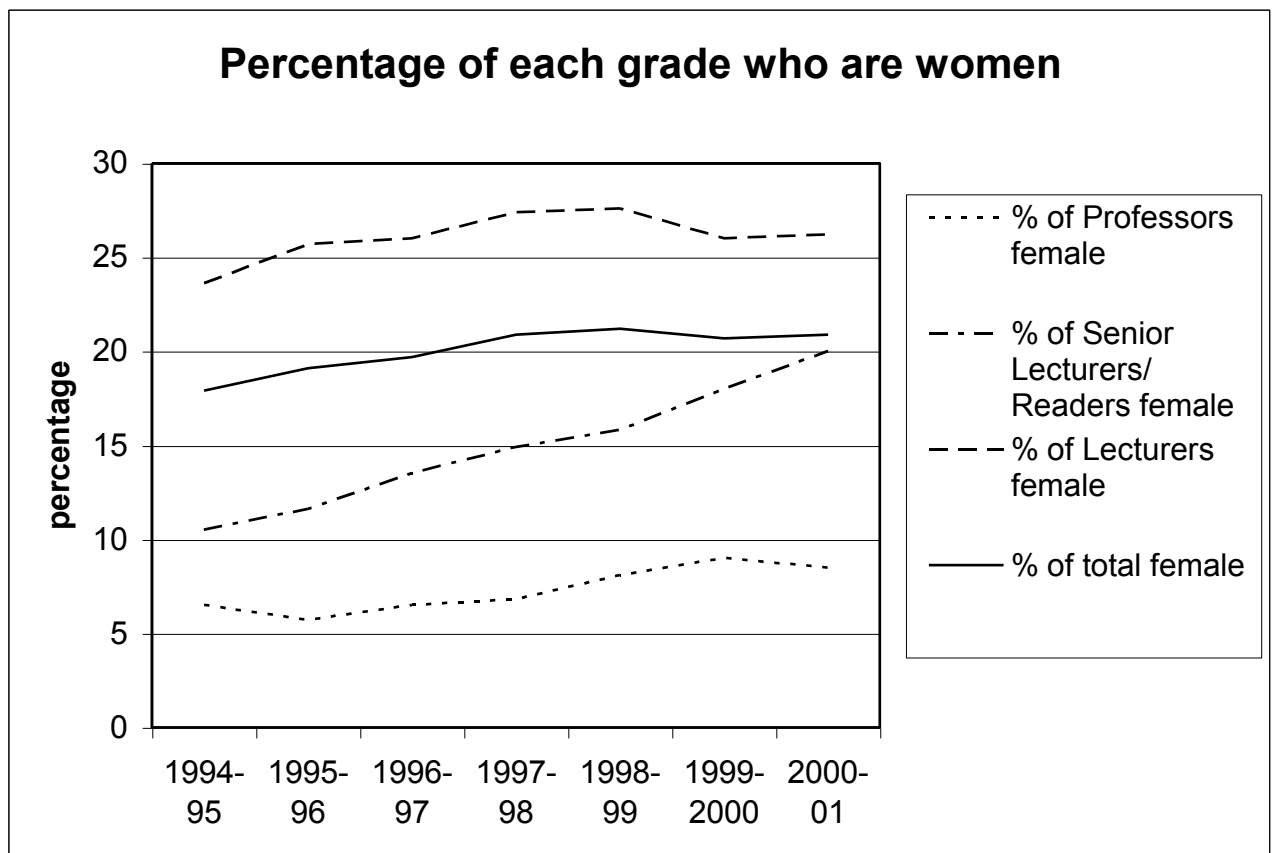


Figure 2

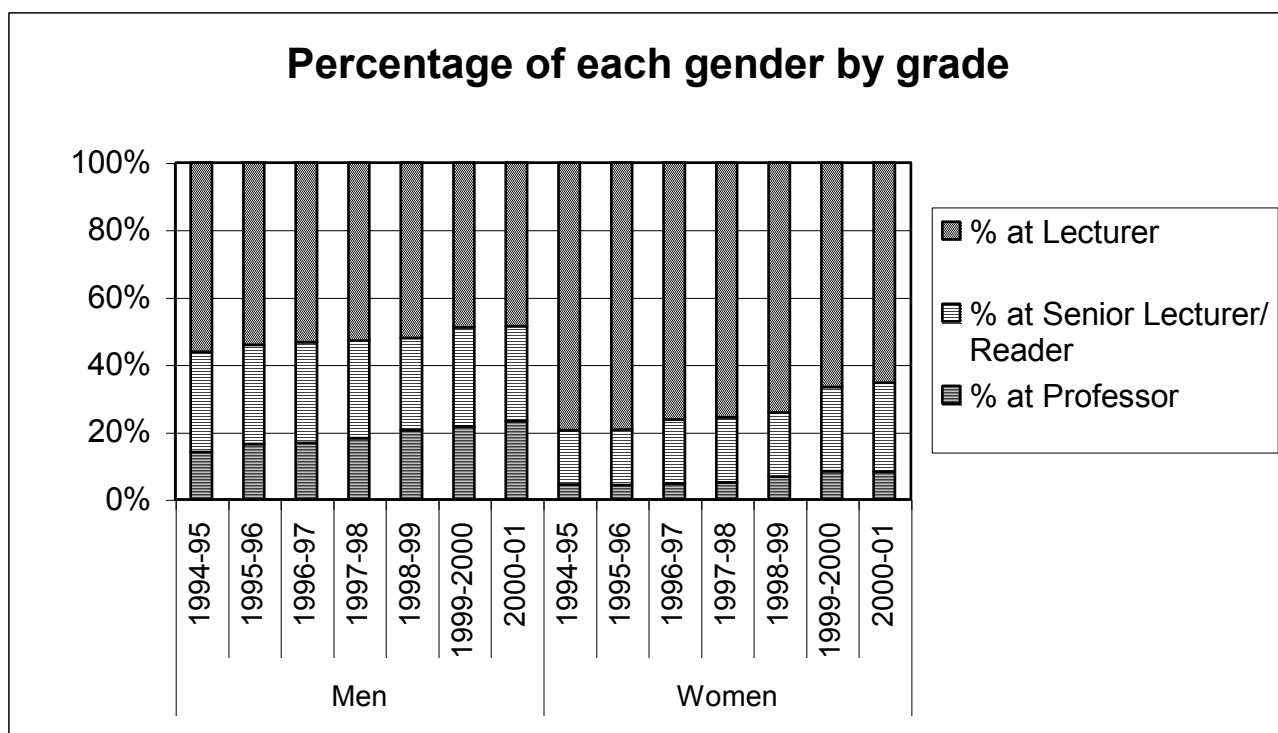
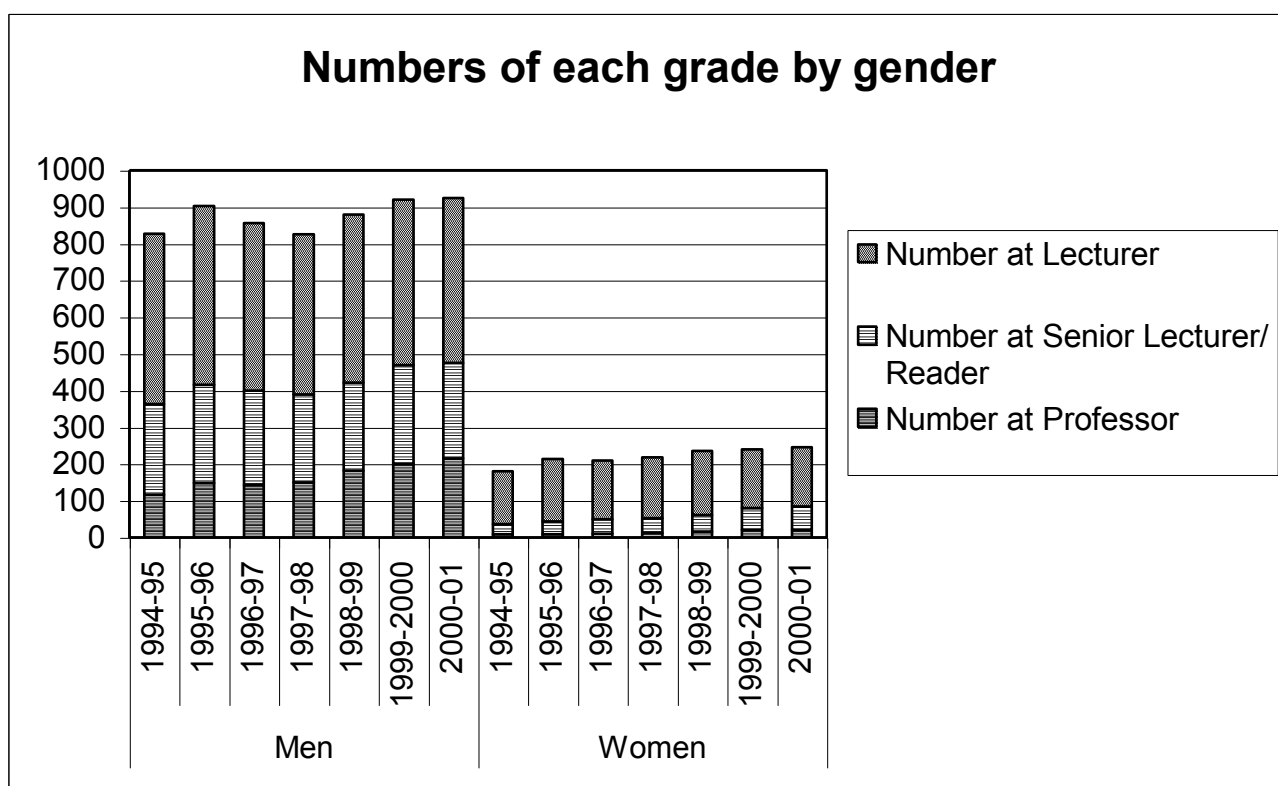


Figure 3



¹ Since the overall number of men with chairs increased by 100 and if we assume that most existing chairs were over 45 the proportion of retirements could be around 30% in six years which is up to 40 posts to replace.